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ABSTRACT

A tension exists between two schools of thought regarding the development of children's drawings. One position places great emphasis on the relatively invariant sequence in which figural differentiation comes about, and attempts to explicate the graphic logic which yields the rule-governed changes which can be observed in children's drawings. The other position emphasizes drawing conventions, and attributes great impact to the models available in the social-cultural milieu of the child. In this presentation, similarities as well as differences in figural differentiation, compositional style, and thematic content of children's drawings are examined. The cross-sectional data consist of the drawings of normal children, retarded children, and severely emotionally disturbed children, while the longitudinal data report on the development of a precociously gifted child. (RH)

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Reflections on Cultural Variables and Universals in Young Children's Drawings

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Reflections on Cultural Variables and Universals in Young Children's Drawings

Claire Golomb

The study of children's drawings as an index of cognitive development dates back to the beginning of this century. Early on, such authors as Sully (1910), Luquet (1913), and Burt (1921) were struck by the presumed similarity between early child art and primitive art, as if the child recapitulates in his lifetime the history of art. In both cases, the term "primitive" implies a cognitively undeveloped state of mind. Such similarity also suggests that a drawing is a culture-free product of the child's mind. Indeed, the view of drawing as a culture-free mental activity ideally suited as a non-verbal tool for the assessment of intelligence, motivated Goodenough to construct her well known Draw-a-Person test (1926). Thus a long tradition exists that looks for uniformities in the developmental progression of a child's drawings. Although Goodenough's conceptions were grounded in the associationistic psychology of her day, other investigators of a different persuasion, have also looked for regularities in the development of drawing. Thus, for example, Henry Schaefer-Simmern in the Unfolding of Artistic Activity (1948), and the Gestalt psychologist Rudolf Arnheim in Art and Visual Perception (1954, 1974) postulate a relatively invariant sequence in which drawing unfolds. These authors consider drawing development within the broader context of representational processes, and emphasize the role differentiation plays in visual concept formation and in the creation of graphic equivalents.

At the other end of the spectrum, we find the notion that art-forms are social conventions, arbitrary signs that do not stand in any special relationship to the object. In this view, the adult as well as the child artist works with a language that is determined by the culture, and drawings are said to be modeled after the sources available in the environment. The most extreme position in this camp is that of the philosopher Nelson Goodman (1968), and a somewhat modified version can be found in the writings of Brent and Majory Wilson (1977). Although his theoretical orientation differs from the above mentioned authors, the work of the anthropologist Alexander Alland (1983) also stresses cultural variability in children's early drawings.

This controversy can be summed up in a somewhat simplified manner by asking the following questions: 1. What kinds of graphic models does the child create for the representation of people, animals, plants, houses, cars and other objects of interest? 2. Does the child forge an original vocabulary of shapes that is organized according to an internally derived and intrinsically meaningful set of rules or, alternately, does the child acquire these models by studying observable illustrations and copying them the best he can? 3. What is the nature of the changes which the child makes in his drawings? With these questions we are considering whether representational development can best be described in qualitative terms, as a stage-like progression, in which case drawing development is seen as an orderly, meaningful and relatively autonomous process. In this view, children generate rule systems which reflect their understanding

of the medium and guide the actual process of graphic representation. The issue we are raising concerns the possibility of a relatively universal language of art, at least in early phases of development, and a progression through an invariant sequence of stages. Such a view can be contrasted with the notion that all forms of drawing, including the early ones, are the product of cultural influences. In the latter case, the early drawings reflect, perhaps unsuccessfully, the pictorial models available to the child, and are the product of imitation and training. Such a conception has no place for a stage-like progression or for stage-like constraints, and no specific sequence can be predicted.

If we consider drawing as a naturally evolving graphic language, we have to ask what the impact of the culture might be in terms of "when", "where" and "how much". If, however, drawing systems are the product of cultural conventions, we have to ask whether the impact of cultural models transmitted by peers, siblings, picture book illustrations, and so on, can adequately account for the regularities, and the uniformities that characterize the developmental course in drawing.

These are fundamental and broad questions, and we cannot begin to address all the aspects I have mentioned in the time-limited format of this presentation. What I can do, however, is to look for evidence that is pertinent to our topic. Specifically, I shall review, briefly, findings from four cross-sectional studies. The first one addresses the question of the development of form in its broadest sense, and the second reports on the development of the depiction of movement and action in a very narrow sense. Next come two studies

from developmentally atypical children: one reports on mentally retarded children, the other on severely emotionally disturbed children. Finally, I shall report on a longitudinal study of a precociously gifted child-artist, Eytan. Drawing upon these diverse findings, I shall argue that the evidence supports a conception of graphic development that, at least in its early stages, is relatively uniform and sequentially ordered. We shall then touch upon the role of culture.

In a carefully designed cross-sectional study of 250 children, ages 2 to 7 years, we asked the youngsters to draw diverse items, including humans, animals, plants and man-made objects. The data were analyzed in terms of use of line, shape, direction, orientation, proportion, size and figure construction. The results, generally, support Arnheim's conception of development, with a sequentially ordered pattern of differentiation along the above mentioned dimensions. From simple all purpose shapes such as the circle to specific and differentiated ones; from one-dimensional to two-dimensional lines; from straight to curved and multi-angled ones; from right-angular relations to oblique ones; fromt he single and canonical orientation to side and rear views; from global to differentiated figures, construted at first by the addition of separately drawn parts, and then by a continuous contour-line.

In a second study, we focused on the depiction of movement and gesture, and included specific instructions to portray action. Our participants were 104 elementary school children in grades 1 through 5, and 50 college students. The findings for the total sample document the gradual and orderly differentiation of the human figure

in motion, beginning with head orientation and the direction of the arms, proceeding with diagonally drawn legs, legs bent at the knee and, eventually, arms drawn at different angles to the body. Limbs seem to be the most "bendable", and are relatively simple though reliable indicators of motion. Bending the torso appears to be the most difficult task, even for our educated adult sample. In a number of different assignments, we note the tendency to change the direction of the limbs, but to maintain, where possible the upright torso which preserves the stability of the right-angular relationship.

Reflecting on these two sets of data, we can say that they highlight common underlying principles, and that the drawn figure undergoes a slow but orderly change. The sequence of changes is consistent and almost invariant across subjects and subject-matter. The degree to which the child's early drawings seem relatively impermeable to the prevailing cultural norms, is quite noteworthy. One might almost speak of a seeming blindness to the forms depicted in picture books, the comics, the TV characters and, by and large, it seems as if children's early graphic models do not derive from their pictorial world.

I shall now briefly report on two studies whose subjects were developmentally atypical children (Golomb, 1977). The first group comprised 34 mentally retarded children, with a mean IQ of 56, and a chronological age range of 4 to 13 years. These children were matched for mental age, socioeconomic status, public school attendance, and intact family structure, with their normal counterparts. They were given a variety of representational tasks, all dealing with the human figure, including drawing, figure completion, abstract form puzzles,

and drawing on dictation. The major focus of our analysis was the degree of figural differentiation. The results indicate that the familially retarded children performed as well as the developmentally normal children. Performance on these tasks was, predominantly, a function of mental age.

The second study (Anath Golomb, 1986, 1987 in press) examined the drawings of 108 severely emotionally disturbed children, ranging in age from 6 to 14 years. The drawing tasks consisted of four assigned themes, and the drawings were scored for compositional strategy, that is the manner in which items are grouped and the overall spatial organization of a drawing. The scores of the clinical sample were compared with those obtained for a normal sample, and the results indicate that differences do not consistently favor one group over another. The development of compositional strategies in drawing, therefore, appears to occur independently of emotional disturbance, and to remain relatively unaffected by psychopathology.

Finally, we come to our longitudinal study, to the drawings of Eytan. These drawings are of particular interest because they illustrate very concretely how a very young child, from the age of two years on, set about learning to draw. According to his mother, he drew what interested him, especially all sorts of machinery, cars, compressors, helicopters and airplanes. He drew in order to "understand". The subjects that intrigued him were encountered on walks through the neighborhood, and upon coming home he would draw them. Although interested in picture books, he never copied from them. Within a very short time-period, this preschooler taught himself isometric perspective, overlap of forms, size diminution,

foreshortening and even some divergent perspective. Since the parents collected all his early efforts, including the tadpoles and fold-out drawings, this is a unique collection. It presents a record of graphic problem solving, done quite independently of the picture books available to toddlers and preschoolers. Clearly, there was support on the part of the parents, but since they are "enlightened" modern parents, who do not believe in early training in the arts, in copying or otherwise fostering a particular style, they were determinately non-interventionists. The father, who is an architect, used to paint in his free time, but his paintings are large and quite colorful abstracts, while Eytan worked with a pen or pencil (monochromatic) and, as this collection indicates, was motivated to achieve a realistic likeness (see slides). This collection affords us a view of a <u>self-directed</u> drawing development that, while it goes through the usual "stages", does so very rapidly and with extreme ease and competence. Clearly, coming from a home in which books and encyclopedias were available, Eytan was familiar with some of the cross-sections depicted in anatomy books, observed the typical illustrations of children's books, and had access to photographs and other materials. Nevertheless, his development proceeded at its own pace, guided by an intrinsic visual logic, and we can clearly see what kinds of problems he wanted to solve as he returned time and again to some favorite subject, such as buses and cars. To consider his experimentation and solutions in terms of "conventions" is to trivialize the orderliness of the progression, and its internal time-table.

Having made what I consider a strong statement for a weak version

of the stage conception, what is the role of culture, what constraints, possibilities and options can we attribute to its impact?

To begin with, art making, with few exceptions, occurs within a social setting which supplies the materials and implements. We know from different sets of studies, that the medium has an important impact on representation, for example, whether abstract or figurative. So what one can make, depends in part, on the medium and the implements. We also know that children do not create in a vacuum, that they observe the work of peers and siblings, and often try to follow in their footsteps. If that is called "imitating", so be it, even though the effort to approximate what the elder is doing does not lead to a copy, as we know all too well. Who would not want to draw and paint like Rembrandt! Themes, that is the content of a drawing, clearly reflect the child's social setting which may lead to the prototypical drawings of witches and graveyards, ships and pirates, monsters and dragons, rockets and spacecrafts, missiles and airplanes, TV heroes and many more. They are the stuff daydreams, dramatic play, and drawings are made of. Dependent on the roles assigned to males and females in the culture, we find attention to dress, hairstyle and activity. This list of potential cultural influences can easily be extended. Moreover, with the particular characters also comes the desire to protray them in their conventional image, including the actions that are associated with them. Models can be sought out and, depending on motivation, practice, talent and the relative simplicity of the graphic moels, they will influence the drawings youngsters make during the middle and late childhood years. By and large, their influence seems to be limited to those youngsters who continue to

favor the drawing medium. The Wilsons (1982) and Duncan (1981) have written, quite eloquently, about these prolific, usually talented youngsters. However, the majority of school age children seem not to avail themselves of this opportunity. They continue to elaborate the earlier, typical child-art models or to discontinue drawing altogether. Why the readily available pictorial models are not eagerly incorporated into the pictorial-representational world of most children -- is a question we ought not to neglect asking.

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